
The Defense Threat Reduction Agency: Combating the Threat of Small Arms and Light Weapons Overseas

By
Lieutenant Colonel James Toomey
Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management

The problem of unsecured and uncontrolled small arms and light weapons (SALW) throughout the world, but particularly in lesser developed regions like Africa, has been recognized for years. Since the 1970s, at least forty civilian aircraft have been hit by man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS)¹, with several of these attacks linked to rebel groups fighting in the Congo (DR) and Angola, and as suspected by many, involved in the downing of an aircraft carrying the presidents of both Rwanda and Burundi in 1994², an incident which triggered the subsequent massacre of more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda. In terms of more common, day-to-day threats, although there are very few comprehensive statistics available on small arms use, the United Nations has estimated that over 500,000 people are killed every year by conventional firearms alone around the globe, with the bulk of these deaths occurring in conflict zones in developing regions, like Africa.³ In addition, landmines, often classified as small arms, are a prevalent threat today in many parts of Africa, with hundreds of thousands of landmines remaining, unseen and uncharted, in countries across the continent.

In response to this problem, and the particular threat of possible terrorist attacks using SALW against U.S. interests, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) began providing the Department of State, starting in 2001, with technical assistance in various efforts aimed at safeguarding and reducing foreign national stockpiles of these weapons and munitions. These efforts gradually evolved into a formal SALW program, which provides technical assessments of stockpiles and offers educational seminars on best practices for physical security and management. With a small staff and budget, the SALW program team has, to date, made a tremendous difference through its missions in thirty-four countries around the globe, including ten African countries.

In Africa, the program has already provided numerous inspections of storage sites, sponsored technical and executive management seminars for audiences ranging from ordnance disposal non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to senior ministry of defense officials, and supported the State Department's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (WRA) in assisting countries with identifying items for destruction, prioritizing physical security upgrades, and verifying SALW destruction activities. One specific, recent success story in the region are the program visits to the Republic of the Congo in 2007, which led to the disablement of 57 MANPADS and 14 surface-to-air missiles (SAMS) and will soon facilitate the U.S.-supported destruction of 184 tons of ammunition and explosives and 9,400 additional SALWs. Another recent major accomplishment occurred last year in Burundi, where the SALW team assisted in the disablement of 327 MANPADS and helped arrange the future destruction of 14,300 other weapons and 114 tons of ammunition and explosives.

1. "Combating the Threat of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)," Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) Small Arms and Light Weapons Brochure, 2007.

2. Hunter, Thomas, "The Proliferation of MANPADS," *Janes*, http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/jir/jir021128_1_n.shtml, November 28, 2002.

3. Haddad, Musue N., "Arms Proliferation Increases Repression," *The Perspective*, <http://www.theperspective.org/smallarms.html>, July 20, 2001.

For security cooperation managers in AFRICOM and security assistance officers (SAOs) in the field, the SALW program can be a significant, untapped source for supporting country security cooperation efforts. At no cost to the SAO's funds, DTRA's SALW program can send a team to a country to perform site surveys and assessments, conduct physical security and stockpile management seminars (PSSMs), and encourage and support follow on Department of State efforts to create destruction or demining programs. The net results can include greater access to host nation officials and military facilities, improved mil-to-mil relations, free manpower for ongoing SAO operations, and additional funding for the host nation, through the Department of State, for destruction activities as well as military construction, education, and training in conjunction with these activities. For example, as a result of the mission in Burundi, the Department of State is providing approximately \$520,000 to the country to accomplish security upgrades to storage facilities used for weapons and munitions. Moreover, it's a relatively easy source to tap: an SALW program mission can be initiated by an e-mail from the SAO or host country to DTRA, accompanied by informal endorsements by the country team, the Department of State, the Combatant Command, the Joint Staff, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. For more information on starting this type of engagement in your country, contact the SALW program personnel at (703) 767-2789 or salw@dtra.mil.

DTRA's SALW program is a win-win security cooperation activity, and when applied in a region like Africa, where security cooperation budgets remain tight and SALW proliferation and control issues remain critical concerns, it can be a great way to extend and improve U.S. relationships while keeping dangerous weapons and munitions out of the hands of criminals and terrorists.

About the Author

Lieutenant Colonel James Toomey is currently an instructor at the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management. He has worked as a Sub-Saharan African (48J) Foreign Area Officer (FAO) for the U.S. Army for over nine years, with tours of duty at three U.S. embassies abroad including service as a Defense Attaché in Haiti and Liberia, and an assignment as the Chief, Central Africa Branch at the U.S. European Command (EUCOM). He possesses four degrees related to international business/political affairs, including master's degrees from Columbus State University and the University of Florida, where he also obtained a certificate in African studies.